

What is claimed is:

1. A system for making customer reservations, the system comprising:

5 at least one individual service provider through which reservations for the respective individual service providers may be made directly;

10 a central reservation provider through which reservations for the at least one individual service provider may be made; and

15 means for communicating between the central reservation provider and the respective individual service providers, wherein a first portion of the available reservations from each individual service provider are held by the central reservation provider and a second portion of the available reservations from each individual service provider are held by each respective individual service provider and, if a reservation requested from either the central 20 reservation provider or an individual service provider is not available from that provider, available reservations are transferred from the other of the central reservation provider or the individual service provider to the central reservation provider or the 25 individual service provider via the means for communicating so as to allow a reservation to be made.

2. A reservation system as claimed in claim 1, wherein the central reservation provider is an Internet booking service.

3. A reservation system as claimed in claim 2, wherein the individual service provider uses computer software for communicating automatically with the Internet booking service.

35 4. A reservation system as claimed in claim 3, wherein

the reservation system is installed over a local area network.

5. A reservation system as claimed in claim 1, wherein
the system comprises means for automatically activating
the means for communicating between the central
reservation provider and individual service providers at
regular intervals to transfer available reservations
between the providers if the distribution of the
10 available reservations between the providers is out of
balance.

6. A reservation system as claimed in claim 1, the
system further comprising means for reserving one of a
15 plurality of items from available reservations, in which
the time period of availability of each item is divided
into consecutive blocks of a predetermined duration so
as to provide a plurality of sets of said consecutive
blocks representing the total availability of items
20 within the time period, wherein the system accepts a
reservation request if at least one consecutive block is
available for each part of the time period for which the
reservation is required such that blocks relating to
more than one of the items may be combined to provide
25 the reservation.

7. A reservation system for reserving one of a
plurality of items, the system comprising means for
dividing the time period of availability of each item
30 into consecutive blocks of a predetermined duration so
as to provide a plurality of sets of said consecutive
blocks representing the total availability of items
within the time period, wherein the system accepts a
reservation request if at least one consecutive block is
35 available for each part of the time period for which the
reservation is required such that blocks relating to
more than one of the items may be combined to provide

the reservation.

8. A reservation system as claimed in claim 7, further comprising:

5 a database for storing data defining the numbers
and types of items available for reservation together
with details of any reservations made; and
 means for calculating the number of available
blocks using the data from the database each time that a
10 reservation is requested.

9. A reservation system as claimed in claim 7, wherein
the system is for reserving a plurality of different
types of item and the blocks are tagged to indicate the
15 type of item to which they refer.

10. A reservation system as claimed in claim 9, wherein
a reservation is only made if at least one consecutive
block relating to the type of item required is available
20 for each consecutive part of the time period for which
the reservation is required.

11. A reservation system as claimed in claim 7, wherein
the system is for making restaurant reservations and the
25 blocks are of 15 minute duration.

12. A reservation system as claimed in claim 7, wherein
the system includes means for handling a fixed location
reservations such that when a fixed location reservation
30 is requested, a set of consecutive unoccupied blocks
corresponding to the type of item for which the
reservation is requested and covering the entire time
period available for reservations are designated as
fixed location blocks, the blocks corresponding to the
35 reservation time period requested are designated as
being occupied and the remaining designated fixed
location blocks may not be combined with blocks other

than the said fixed location blocks to form a reservation.

13. A reservation system as claimed in claim 12,
5 wherein if consecutive unoccupied blocks corresponding
to the type of item for which the reservation is
requested and covering the entire time period available
for reservations are not present, the system preferably
alerts a user to the fact that it is possible that not
10 all of the reservations made by the system will be
honoured if the fixed location reservation is accepted.

14. A reservation system as claimed in claim 7, wherein
the system includes:

15 means for handling a fixed location reservation
comprising means for checking whether any other fixed
location reservations for items of the type requested
have been made when a fixed location reservation is
requested;

20 means for selecting consecutive unoccupied blocks
corresponding to the type of item for which the
reservation is requested and covering the entire time
period available for reservations; and

25 means for designating the selected blocks
corresponding to the reservation time period requested
as being occupied, wherein if no other fixed location
reservations for items of the type requested have been
made, the selected blocks which precede the reservation
time period are designated as fixed location blocks
30 which may not be combined with other blocks to form a
reservation and the selected blocks coming after the
reservation time period are retained as fungible or
combinable blocks.

35 15. A reservation system as claimed in claim 14,
wherein the system further comprises means for
identifying the latest block in time to have been

designated as a fixed location block, such that when the system determines that other fixed location reservations for items of the type requested have been made, the selected blocks which precede the latest block to be
5 designated as a fixed location block are designated as fixed location blocks which may not be combined with other blocks to form a reservation and the selected blocks coming after the last block to be designated as a fixed location block are retained in the system as
10 fungible or combinable blocks.

16. A reservation system as claimed in claim 7, wherein the system includes means for handling a fixed location reservation comprising:

15 means for checking whether any other fixed location reservations for items of the type requested have been made when a fixed location reservation is requested;
means for selecting consecutive unoccupied blocks corresponding to the type of item for which the
20 reservation is requested and covering the entire time period available for reservations; and
means for designating the selected blocks corresponding to the reservation time period requested as being occupied, wherein if no other fixed location reservations for items of the type requested have been
25 made, the selected blocks which precede the reservation time period and any buffer period which the service provider chooses to add before the reservation period are retained as fungible or combinable blocks, and the
30 selected blocks coming after the reservation time period are designated as fixed location blocks which may not be combined with other blocks to form a reservation.

17. A reservation system as claimed in claim 16,
35 wherein the system further comprises means for identifying the earliest block in time to have been designated as a fixed location block, such that when the

system determines that other fixed location reservations for items of the type requested have been made, the selected blocks which come after the earliest block to be designated as a fixed location block are designated as fixed location blocks which may not be combined with other blocks to form a reservation and the selected blocks coming before the earliest block to be designated as a fixed location block are retained in the system as fungible or combinable blocks.

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18. A reservation system as claimed in claim 7, wherein the system includes:

means for handling a fixed location reservation comprising:

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means for selecting consecutive unoccupied blocks corresponding to the type of item for which the reservation is requested and covering the entire time period available for reservations;

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means for identifying the earliest block in time to have been designated as a fixed location block;

means for identifying the latest block in time to have been designated as a fixed location block; and

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means for designating the selected blocks corresponding to the reservation time period requested as being occupied, wherein the system designates the blocks which come after the earliest block to be designated and the blocks which precede the latest block to be designated as fixed location blocks which may not be combined with other blocks to form a reservation, and wherein any remaining blocks from the selected blocks are retained as fungible or combinable blocks.

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19. A reservation system as claimed in claim 7, further comprising:

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means for handling a fixed location reservation comprising means for checking whether any other fixed location reservations for items of the type requested

have been made when a fixed location reservation is requested;

5 means for selecting consecutive unoccupied blocks corresponding to the type of item for which the reservation is requested and covering the entire time period available for reservations;

10 means for designating the selected blocks corresponding to the reservation time period requested as being occupied;

15 means for identifying the latest block in time to have been designated as a fixed location block across all reservations made if not treated under way (iv);

20 means for identifying the earliest block in time to have been designated as a fixed location block across all reservations made if not treated under way (iv); and

25 means for treating each of the separate fixed location reservations in any one of the following ways in order to maximise the number of fungible or combinable blocks available within the database at any time:

30 i) designating the selected blocks which precede the latest block as fixed location blocks which may not be combined with other blocks to form a reservation and designating the selected blocks coming after the last block as fungible or combinable blocks; or

35 ii) designating the selected blocks which come after the earliest block to be designated as a fixed location block as fixed location blocks which may not be combined with other blocks to form a reservation and designating the selected blocks coming before the earliest block to be designated as a fixed location block as fungible or combinable blocks which are retained; or

40 iii) designating the blocks which come between the earliest block and the latest block as fixed location blocks which may not be combined with other blocks to form a reservation, and designating any remaining blocks

from the selected blocks as fungible or combinable blocks which are retained; or

5 iv) designating all the selected blocks as fixed location blocks which may not be combined with other blocks to form a reservation,

10 wherein the way in which each separate fixed location reservation is treated may be altered each time that a new reservation is made, and the latest block and earliest block are re-identified each time that a new 15 reservation is made or that the way in which any fixed location reservation is treated is altered.

20. A reservation system as claimed in claim 19, the system further comprising means for handling at least two fixed location reservations for the same item, in which the at least two reservations are treated as a single reservation in one of ways (i), (ii) and (iii), and any blocks located between the at least two 25 reservations in time are designated as fixed location blocks which may not be combined with other blocks to form a reservation.

21. A reservation system as claimed in claim 19, the system further comprising means to split the dining session into two separate sessions such that, if at any time every block representing a reservation has been reserved, the session may be split into a first session up to and/or including that time and a second session including and/or from after that time in order to 30 further maximise the number of fungible or combinable blocks available within the system at any time.

22. A reservation system as claimed in claim 7, wherein 35 blocks or sets of blocks of predetermined duration representing items available for reservation from an individual service provider are distributed between a central reservation provider and the individual service

provider such that reservations may be made through either of the individual service provider or the central reservation provider.

5 23. A reservation system as claimed in claim 22, the
system further comprising means for communicating
between the central reservation provider and the
individual service provider, wherein if a reservation
requested from either the central reservation provider
10 or the individual service provider is not available from
that provider, available blocks or sets of blocks are
transferred from the other of the central reservation
provider or the individual service provider to the
central reservation provider or the individual service
15 provider via the means for communicating so as to allow
a reservation to be made.

20 24. A reservation system as claimed in claim 22, the
system further comprising means for communicating
between the central reservation provider and the
individual service provider, wherein if the number of
blocks or sets of blocks held by either the central
reservation provider or the individual service provider
falls below a predetermined minimum level at any time,
25 available blocks are transferred from the other of the
central reservation provider or the individual service
provider to the central reservation provider or the
individual service provider via the means for
communicating.

30 25. A reservation system as claimed in claim 22,
wherein the system is configured such that fixed
location reservations may only be made through the
individual service provider.

35 26. A reservation system as claimed in claim 25,
wherein if the blocks required to make a fixed location

reservation are not available from the central reservation provider or the individual service provider, the system alerts a user to the fact that it is possible that not all the reservations will be honoured if the fixed location reservation is accepted.